

HELPING HANDS

A girl's valentine to Branford

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — One day, when Emilie Agamie was in second grade, she and her mother Eve were cleaning out their linen closet. Emilie noticed, to her dismay, the excess of sample-sized shampoos and lotions and conditioners that had accumulated from hotels over years of family trips.

"They were never going to be used," said the 13-year-old on a recent morning at Lynn's Deli, where she had just set up a wide-mouthed bucket for Emilie's Shelf, her annual February initiative to collect trial-size personal care items for Branford Counseling Center's Basic Needs Program.

"We needed to do something about that."

Her mother was less than surprised. After all, from a young age, Emilie had eschewed birthday presents. Give a gift to people in need, she told her friends and family.

Still, her mother was perplexed. "People share clothes and food, but they don't really share toiletries," she said.

At the time, Emilie was a student at Tisko Elementary School. Serendipitously, her mother encountered super citizen Patricia Andriole, former director of the Branford Counseling Center. At the time, Andriole's grandchildren were also students there.

A few weeks later, Emilie stood before BCC executive director Peter Cimino with a bucketful of sample-sized personal care items and a simple question.

"I asked him, 'how do I know that the people who need these will get them?'" recalled Emilie, whose sunny demeanor and dimpled smile belies her fierce determination. For a moment, he was stumped. Then he pointed to a shelf.

Thus Emilie's Shelf was born.

For the past five years, Emilie's family, classmates, friends, and citizens of



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Emilie Agamie, 13, with her Emilie's Shelf bucket at Lynn's Deli.

Branford have dutifully scoured their own linen closets for travel-size bars of soap, shampoo and conditioner, deodorant, toilet paper, razors, dental floss, body powder, toothpaste, shaving cream, diapers and baby wipes and donated them to Emilie's Shelf.

Last year, the seventh grader at East Shoreline Catholic Academy collected over 1,200 trial-size toiletries—enough, according to the Branford Counseling Center, to overwhelm the original shelf and spill into surrounding areas and, more importantly, to help those in the Basic Needs Program for almost a year.

There is, it seems, no holding back Emilie, a second-degree black belt who's taken the gold medal in board breaking the last three years at the USA Taekwondo National Championships. In fact, her goal next year is to encourage her classmates to start charities of their own.

"Imagine not being able to afford to take a shower with shampoo and soap," she said. "That just can't happen in our town."

► Make donations, until Thursday, Feb. 28 at Lynn's Deli, 318 E. Main St., Towne Pharmacy, 1012 Main St., Branford Counseling Center, 324 Harbor St., and East Shoreline Catholic Academy, 62 Cedar St.